

# Crimson

by Dawid Tysowski

The room was silent. Early in the morning, even the birds decided to stop singing for a while and enjoy the moment as it was. It wasn't too beautiful - clouds obscuring the Sun made it difficult for anybody to smile in that weather. Still, there was something about that day - that morning. Something melancholic within the dense clouds, something hidden beyond the grey masses, low in the skies.

Sat on the windowsill, a pigeon - the most detestable of all birds - was cooing silently, as if he desperately wanted to say something, yet couldn't risk waking anybody up. The ugly urban bird moved his head to left, then again to left, and then turned it right slightly.

Next to him stood a glass vase. Water reached barely to the stems of the flowers in it. It seemed that they hadn't been watered for quite a while, as they had already bent towards the ground. The flowers were red tulips, and the pigeon seemed mesmerized by their looks. He might have been right, there was something to them.

The bird was fascinated by the flowers. Their deep red colour, crimson, was the colour of love. It was also the colour of blood, so dark, almost solid. The pigeon turned his head to the opposite side for a split second, then gave the tulips another piercing look.

Gazing at the red tulips with one of his eyes, the pigeon stopped cooing. He even ceased to move, gripped by the crimson magic, by love and death. Oh, how exquisite they were, those flowers, how tender! Could there be a creature insensitive towards their beauty? The pigeon's eye was locked on the tulips, watching.

A phone rang.

Scared, the ugly bird flew off the windowsill. Sounds of repetitive jingle-like alarm tore him out of the strange trance. The phone kept ringing.

Without raising his head above the pillow, he blindly reached for his phone with his hand, feeling the table with his palm. Having found the noisy bastard, he got up, leaning against his elbows, and clicked the green icon.

"Yeah?" he said in a blurry, monotone voice.

"Half an hour?" He put the phone away from his ear, checking the time displayed. 5:13 a.m. It was already bright outside. "Yeah, it's alright." Listening, he slowly raised himself off the bed and sat on its edge. "Okay, see you."

Intending to get a quick nap, he put the phone down, but then immediately put it back to his ear, as if remembering something. "Hey, Tru? Tru!" He was talking loudly, so that Tru could hear him even if he no longer had the phone close to his head, hoping he wouldn't hang up, as we all do. "Yeah, hey, could you-"

A wave of numbness took over his face, he couldn't feel it. Did he drink last night? He couldn't remember. "Could you buy some milk?" Tru had no objections. "Thanks."

He threw the phone on the bed next to him and covered his face with his hands. His head was hot, despite the cool morning air coming through the open window. For a few moments, he stayed like that, sitting, not trying.

He opened his eyes slowly, letting the light reach his pupils in degrees. He looked around, trying to locate his phone, but he couldn't see it. Who cares, it's just a piece of fucking metal.

Beside his bed, on his desk, was a photo. Taken not so long ago, it depicted five people sitting in an underground pub: Tru, Tru's girlfriend Mikey, Smith (that leather-clad bastard), Jamen, and his sister.

Piercing the photo through, Jamen couldn't let his eyes off of his sister. Back then, she was so pretty, so innocent. He remembered her cute giggle and her beautiful smile. He remembered how happy she used to be, filling the lives of everybody around her with warm rays of a jolly sun. He remembered...

"Fuck," he said under his breath. Some say that swearing can ease the pain, rid you of anger. Presumably, a few *shits* and *motherfuckers* can make you feel better. Not in this case. No words could help Jamen right now. No words.

Still in his pyjamas, he walked to the small kitchen of his rented flat and put a full kettle on the oven. Waiting for the water to reach the boiling temperature, he got dressed - Tru could be there any time. Once he put on his black turtleneck sweater and black trousers, a high-pitched noise reached his ears.

Instead of running to the kitchen to take the kettle off the oven, he just stood there, listening in numbness. Jamen couldn't be bothered. The kettle shrieked and screamed in madness, filling the whole room with its spine-chilling yell. But Jamen waited. He waited so long that now he couldn't hear the devilish kettle at all.

Numb and indifferent, he slowly got to the kitchen, turned the oven off and made himself tea - maybe that would let him relax a little bit. Jamen sat at the table and looked at his wristwatch. He wanted to see how much time he had before Tru came, but he didn't know when he had talked to him. Besides, he wanted to put some milk into the tea, and his fridge wasn't equipped in such amenities at the moment.

Looking through the window, his eyes seemed empty. A senile sage would say that the eyes are the reflection of the soul. Teenage girls would say the same things, looking deep into their lovers' widened pupils. Had it been true that Jamen's eyes were mirroring his soul, then apparently his spirit must have gone for a walk. It took a day off, called in sick, went for vacation. Anyways, Jamen didn't need his soul at that time.

The doorbell was quite pleasant, not one of those ringing bastards, but it made Jamen jump on his chair either way.

Barely had Jamen opened the door, when Tru rushed into the flat, almost hitting Jamen with the door. "Christ Jesus, you won't believe me when I tell you!" He had the same Nirvana shirt he would always wear. The yellow smiley face ironically stared at Jamen from Tru's chest.

Sitting back on his chair, Jamen said more to himself than to Tru: "I probably won't..."

Tru didn't seem to notice Jamen's lack of enthusiasm and decided to go on with his story. "Now, listen to this. Last night, when I got the message about what happened, I just couldn't sleep. In my bed I just lay there and stared at the ceiling and, goddamn me, did I not sleep all night. I wasn't even able to do anything productive, that's what's the worst, really. Like, I couldn't read a single page of a book without getting distracted." Tru seemed to dive in his thoughts, forgetting about the world for a while. Leaning on the kitchen tabletop, he suddenly got sad and his voice became monotonous.

"I couldn't but think about what happened, Jamen, and I still can't do anything else. Such a tragedy, such a damn shame." Tru stopped for a while, meditating on the situation. Jamen kept staring through the window, he heard only every other word coming out of Tru's mouth. The images of his sister, that beautiful, sweet little thing, corrupted his mind. A city pigeon, the most abominable of all birds, sat on the windowsill. Jamen didn't notice him at all. He could only think about his sister, about the accident, about this... situation.

"Anyways, I couldn't sleep and all, so I just put my clothes back on and went out." Tru continued with his story, regaining his spooky enthusiasm. As if trying to fill his mind with everything but the terrible situation that had fallen upon them. "It was sometime around 2 a.m., the middle of the night. It was pitch black outside, I light up a cigarette and think: Well, what do I do now? You know what I did?"

Jamen shook his head in denial, but it wasn't really a response to Tru's words. It was hard to believe what had happened. Reality switched places with dream, days turned into nights, life turned into a nightmare.

Satisfied with the non-verbal response (or the lack thereof), Tru started talking gibberish again. "I went to the only place that's open 24/7 – petrol station. So once I was there I grabbed a bite to eat, you know, hung around for a while and went out. Again – middle of the night, pitch black, and I'm alone. But, you see, I couldn't sleep, so there was no use going back home. It was too chilly to stay outside and I couldn't just stay at the petrol station, I could see it in their eyes they wanted to kick my ass out, fuckers.

"So I did a few walk-arounds about the block and figured out it'd been another hour or so already, so I could get to that station again. I'm walking down the street and I hear a car honk, I turn around and see an ugly, green Peugeot, and the driver inside, gesturing at me, saying he wasn't honking at me. I think: "Alright then", and keep moving. I get to the station and the Peugeot gets there at around the same time and three guys get out of it, totally drunk. One of them points at my shirt and says: "Nirvana." I say: "Yup." But the other one looks at me and says: "Pussy." And I think: "Alright then."

Given up on trying to make sense out of the story, Jamen stared through the window. Trees, blocks of flats, people walking around, and that ugly pigeon - he didn't see any of that. His eyes were empty, his soul not there.

Tru did his best to replace the obnoxious thoughts of the situation with nonsense. "And I went into the station and ordered, umm, like a hot dog, but I couldn't decide which sauce to choose. They've changed their menu recently, you know, they've got Mexican, American, ketchup, Szechuan, garlic, everything. They even-

"Can you add mayo to it?" asked Jamen, tilting his head towards Tru a tiny bit, almost unnoticeably.

Tru couldn't hide his confusion. "Can you add *what?*"

Indifference on Jamen's face, words spilling out of his mouth as if unbeknownst to himself. "Can you add mayo to a hotdog?"

"Yeah, I guess so, but I don't know why anybody would do that..."

"Okay," said Jamen, and stared at the window again. The glass was dirty, with stains blurring the vision. *I wonder how long it takes for the window to get so dirty that I can't see through it,* Jamen wondered. *Not too long, I hope.*

A moment of silence followed their clumsy exchange of words, a caricature of a conversation. Dark thoughts started to cover Tru's head again. He couldn't let that happen, he couldn't stand it. "What was I...?" he asked.

"Hotdog, petrol station." This time Jamen didn't move at all.

"Oh, right!" Tru got back on his train of thought again. Scavenging through Jamen's cupboards, he produced a pack of crisps and started eating. Without waiting to finish chewing, he got back to telling his story. "I didn't know which sauce to choose and I asked the cashier about their offer." Thirst made itself felt, and Tru started to look for a cup. "It was nice talking to her, but, umm, there was a guy on my left, from that Peugeot, and he told me to "just fuck off." And I think: "Alright then". I went out, avoiding that Peugeot as much as I could and, getting farther and farther away, I could hear them start the engine and just *zooooom*.

With a cup in his hand, Tru approached Jamen to pour himself some tea. "And guess what?" said Tru chewing, swallowing, and drinking at the same time. "Not a second passed and right behind them *ioioio*. Blue lights speeding right behind their ugly Peugeot."

Tru smiled to himself. "And I think: "Alright then". Then I came back home to change my clothes and it was getting bright outside so I just figured I'd give you a ring."

Was the story over? Tru didn't know what message he wanted to convey himself, and Jamen didn't seem to care. Sitting on a chair next to Jamen, he said: "I could still hear them sirens, though." Lost in thought again, both of them were now staring somewhere into the abyss, trying to see deep within themselves. Taking a sip of his tea, Tru realized something.

"Oh, I forgot to buy milk."

"Awesome," replied Jamen. Tru wanted to compensate for his mishap somehow, but his tongue didn't listen to him at all. "So which sauce did you choose?" Jamen asked, not even pretending to be interested.

"Um, I beg your pardon?" said Tru stuttering. He had no idea what Jamen was talking about. Looking at him, confused, the mild chime of the doorbell filled the room with an eerily jolly sound for a second time.

"It must be Mikey!" Tru rushed to the door. Thrown out of his trance, Jamen too stood up to welcome the new visitor.

Driven by excitement, Tru almost pulled the door out of his hinges. Jolly, almost laughing, he opened the door. Seeing who's on the other side, his enthusiasm left him again.

"Oh, hey Smith."

Without uttering a single word, Smith corrected his leather jacket, combed his hair with his fingers, and entered the flat. He was furious.

Jamen approached the door to greet his friend. No handshakes, just exchanging glances, a respectful nod. Jamen was too powerless to say anything, so Tru took the mantle of hospitality. "Do you want some tea?" Tru tried sending a smile to Smith, a small gesture of friendliness.

Jamen liked Smith, but he could never be sure if Smith liked him back. They used to spend a lot of time together. Since Smith got nearer to sister, they would see each other more and more often. But now, without her, and with the shadow of the situation hanging above them, they didn't have anything in common. Maybe despite the turtle-neck sweaters, though Smith's was grey.

"Are you fucking serious? Do you really think *tea* is what I need now?" *How cute.* Smith pierced Tru with anger in his eyes, but couldn't see anything in them. Then he looked at Jamen with similar results. He couldn't stand looking at Jamen now, not after what happened, so he glimpsed at Tru again. *Not this fucking moron.* Smith had only just come, like Jamen had asked them to, and he already wanted to get out of there. "I'm going for a smoke." Heading towards the balcony, Smith pushed Tru with his shoulder. Not taking any offence, Tru closed the door behind him and followed Smith to the balcony. Yup, a smoke seemed like a good idea.

Smith produced a metal cigarette holder. Putting one into his mouth, he offered a cigarette to Tru, just to shut him up. Smith couldn't stand still, he kept twitching, combing his hair with his fingers, putting his hand in and out of his pocket.

Jamen joined them, but he didn't want to smoke, it made him want to puke. He had tried it a couple times in the past, just because he thought it looked cool, yet he couldn't get used to the smoke in his lungs.

The three of them were standing in silence, not looking at one another, trying to find something to rest their eyes on. The photo with the five of them in Jamen's room, the glass ashtray on the windowsill, an ugly pigeon flying around frantically, tulips in a vase.

Trying to break the silence, Jamen raised his head and looked at Smith, who was trying to blow anger away from his lungs along with the smoke. "Are you..." Jamen found it hard to formulate a single question. "Can you manage?"

Still smoking, Smith decided to let the sorrow out of his mind, maybe that would help. "I don't know, man. They called me, told me what happened and... and I thought that was it for me!" Smith was almost screaming. "I felt like without her nothing would make sense anymore." He was losing himself in his thoughts. "And know what, nothing does. This situation, it was the end of this bloody world for me. Why would I get out of bed knowing that I'm not gonna see her anyway, not today, not ever!"

Smith locked his eyes on the flowers standing on the windowsill. He took another toke. "She liked tulips. Red ones. Deep crimson. You probably knew that, she is... she was your sister after all. But... shit... but the most difficult thing for me is to live with the awareness that for the rest of my damn life I'm going to bring red tulips to her grave."

Smith was trying to hold back tears. "I loved her, Jamen, and I'm not alright. And I know that you're not alright too, not even Tru is alright. I know he has his own way of grieving, good for him..."

Silence. No sound, just smoke and cooing of birds. Smith covered his face with his palm, drying his eyes. "Nobody's fucking alright."

The phone in Tru's pocket vibrated. A message. "Mikey just texted me, she'll be here in a minute." He put the cigarette on the ashtray. "I'll just let her in." Tru got back to the flat, leaving the two to themselves. Jamen tried to follow him, but Smith stopped him.

"No, Jamen. I don't think I can manage."

Smith finished his cigarette as well and both of them walked to the front door. When they reached it, Mikey was already there. Smoke was still coming out of the two cigarettes on the glass ashtray.

Tru and Mikey were talking about something but stopped when Jamen got closer. While she hugged him, Smith leaned against the wall with his arms crossed. "Are you okay?" she asked Jamen.

"I'm alright, thanks."

"I hope you slept well."

"As well as always, don't worry."

Mikey bestowed a sad smile upon Jamen, who stared at the ground. "What about you?" she asked Smith. To no avail. He looked at her as if she had hurt his feelings, then looked at Jamen, and turned around, heading toward the balcony again.

"How is he?" asked Mikey quietly once Smith was gone. She looked genuinely concerned about him.

"Bad," replied Jamen. "He's bad."

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Smith was walking around the room with a drink in his hand. Jamen got him some whiskey, for tea certainly wasn't what he needed. Jamen and Tru were sat at the table; Tru talking some gibberish again and twitching with his hands, and Jamen staring blindly at his mug, absent.

Mikey was the only one who loved Tru. She listened to him, and she could read between the lines. Tru was different, that's a fact, but this oddity made him... special. Not the brightest, not the fastest one. But still, that unchanged Nirvana shirt and his hairdo - they made Tru authentic. Honesty and resigning from masks, that was bravery. Not kicking around like a baby, but making the effort not to focus on himself, or how others perceive him, and just trying to make other people feel better - he was air, the always-blowing wind of change, going God knows where.

These thoughts crossed Mikey's mind, as a cascade of words was leaving Tru's full-lipped mouth. *You need to shave, my love*, noticed Mikey, reminding herself of Tru's clumsiness. She stood up from the couch and sat beside Tru, trying not to disturb Smith in his rage.

She understood Tru, his desperate attempt to be *for* others. She understood Jamen - his sister's death will leave a deep scar on his psyche; a sleeping volcano inside him. For Mikey, there was only one way to get out of this situation - be the strongest person in the room. She could accept everybody mildly and by degrees, but she also could break your spine if you dare to do something stupid - she was water. But above all, she understood Smith.

And Smith indeed was enraged. Someone said that aggression is the epitome of strength. You wonder - why wouldn't it be? Why, the alpha male is the strongest and could beat the asses of other males! Why, only the fittest shall survive! Why, the swiftest soldier wins the battle with his enemy!

But can't the alpha male be easily poisoned - without strength? Aren't the fittest outwitting the rest? And isn't it the most patient soldier who shall win the war? Smith was the polar opposite of all these things - he was fire: anger, hatred, helplessness.

Jamen failed to notice that anything changed in the room, let alone Mikey changing places. He was in his little universe, leaving everything to himself. Talk to somebody? Why? In his little private space, Jamen felt comfortable, and he couldn't share it.

In his head, strange things were happening. He felt all the feelings - anger, understanding, strength and helplessness. He was stone, all these things at once, but cold on the outside. Jamen was ready to explode at any time.

In his heavy boots, Smith put his glass with whiskey on ice loudly on the table and sat right next to Jamen. He couldn't stand still and kept jingling on the glass with his golden ring as if he was trying to get attention. Surprising as the results of this social test might be, everybody seemed to shut up. *Finally*, thought Smith. He took a huge gulp of his drink, his face twitched. Having wiped his face with the palm of his hand, he started looking around their faces. They were all deep in contemplation, their eyes fixed on some arbitrary physical object, not looking anywhere at all. Smith just couldn't stand it.

"So what do we do about it?" He looked around the table again. "Hm? The situation!?" Smith was getting impatient with those useless people. "Anybody gonna tell me what the fuck we are supposed to do now?"

Still looking at his mug, examining its shape and texture, Jamen couldn't put up with Smith anymore. "Honestly, I thought you would be the one with a reasonable idea."

*How dare you, bastard!* Some ancient fire of anger lit up in his pupils. Sparks were almost falling out of his eyes, so red with anger he was. On his chair, letting go of his whiskey on ice, he leaned towards Jamen. Smith kept leaning over, and over, and over, until his nose almost - almost! - touched Jamen's cheek.

"A reasonable idea?" Smith almost spat these words out. He chuckled hysterically and his face changed in a devilish twitch. "I'll tell you a reasonable idea," he almost screamed at Jamen. "I come home tonight, I slit my fucking veins - how's that for a reasonable idea!?"

"Smith!" interrupted Mikey. Despite the high pitch of her voice, it left no doubt about her powerfulness. "Don't you even say that!"

Smith couldn't weight his words, he was teeming with emotions. "Fuck you, Mikey."

For the first time, torn out of his lunatic talkativeness and confusion, Tru decided to participate. Naive as he might have been, this time he took the side of reason. "Hey, stop it! Don't you think you're being a bit unfair?"

Mikey didn't allow Smith to respond. Her venomous tongue supported by her strength couldn't have been stopped. "Of course he is unfair, 'cause he's a selfish, egotistic cunt." She couldn't restrain herself anymore, it was too much. "Do you think you're the only one in pain? The only one mourning, the only one whose whole world has fallen apart?"

Though the situation had not been resolved in the tiniest bit, they all seemed to calm down. Mikey's words were velvet for their pain, the arm in which you can cry until you go blind. "We all loved her, we all smiled when she smiled and cried when she cried. I know what she meant for you, and I know it's not easy for you, but taking your life ain't gonna change a thing."

A single tear fell down on Jamen's cheek. His face was numb again. Inside, he was empty. "You're blind, Smith, look around you. Open your eyes and take a good look around yourself." Smith's eyes were locked on Mikey. "... I don't know what I'm gonna do next, and I don't think anybody in this room does."

Hardly had she finished, when Jamen stood up and rushed to the front door. He left the flat, he left his head. Let them fight inside that room, let them fight inside his mind. Jamen just wanted to cut himself off - off from anger, off from reason, off from confusion.

The three of them went silent. Was there any point in fighting? Should they keep on shouting at each other for no reason, now that Jamen was gone? Would that even change anything? It definitely wouldn't bring Jamen's sister back to life, that's for sure.

"Mikey, please, at least try to understand me." Smith tried to compensate for his going off. "It's not you, or Jamen, that I'm angry with. I'm in anger with *her*. Because she left me, left us. I fucking hate her for it. I'm furious, and I feel like it's all her fault. I always loved her, you know it. But now... now I hate her." She understood.

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The higher the flat's storey, the cheaper it was. All of those wealthy widows pay high rent so that they don't have to climb up and down the stairs each day. It's those poor yet agile youths who go for the flats on the highest floors.

It took Jamen a while to get down from the seventh floor of the building, a gloomy reminder of the region's communist past. Once he got to the entrance door, he almost burst through it. It was a solid construction, so the glass didn't break - it would otherwise.

Jamen couldn't be bothered looking for a bench, or even a curb. His vision was already blurred with tears. Like Jesus falling from the cross, he fell on his knees, covered his face with the palms of his hands, and wept. He used to feel different feelings. He used to be high

and he used to be happy. He used to be sad and he used to be loved. He had felt arousal and he had felt passion. From all the feelings that he knew and from all the things he'd experienced, there was nothing so pure, natural, and human as crying. It's when emotions take precedence over reason; when we weep for our deceased loved ones; when we sob for the past that's never to come back; when we can't stop the tears coming from our eyes, falling on our cheeks and ruining our handwriting; when we can't stop shaking and our faces show their despair in spasmodic fits of suffering; then we feel most human, then we know what it means to live.

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His flat stood empty, devoid of the jolly laughter of his sister.

His kitchen table, where he shed his first tear, was empty. Only a mug after his morning tea.

The cigarette tray was empty too, Jamen never smoked; he didn't like it at all.

On his table, there was a photo taken in that underground pub - Jamen with his sister, it was on her nineteenth birthday. They had spent that night alone, both of them respected some private space.

It was a silent afternoon. On his windowsill, an ugly pigeon couldn't take his eyes off of the flowers in the glass vase. Had he not been but an ignorant bird, he would have noticed the deep, red colour of the flowers. Crimson.